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ABSTRACT

This study sought a better understanding of faculty culture and was designed to allow faculty to describe their own cultural experience through a series of structured interviews. Fifty faculty members at three universities were asked to voice their beliefs about faculty culture, particularly in regard to faculty stratification (perception of power). Data from the faculty interviews, which were conducted in the summer of 1996, were then compared with perceptions of faculty as expressed in popular media (films, novels, and news media). The media messages of exaggeration and embellishment were found to be combined with elements of truth. The popular media messages showed faculty as aloof, lacking common sense, unproductive, and often abusive of their positions. Faculty generally described themselves as underappreciated by administrators and students; isolated from the public; "keepers" of knowledge in a vaporous society; and the primary reason students attend college. The general findings of the study validate previous work and suggest that power is related to tenure status and rank. Two tables list films and novels reviewed for the research. (JLS)

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College Faculty Cultures:

Dominance in the Academy

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Running Head: Faculty Cultures in the Academy

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Abstract

College faculty members have tremendous freedom in terms of scheduling their work-related responsibilities. These work responsibilities have been described as vague, with the exceptions of teaching and research. The result is a broad culture, comprised of multiple subcultures among faculty, stratified by academic disciplines, faculty rank, tenure status, and productivity. Through a series of structured interviews, 50 faculty members voiced their beliefs about the stratification. These data were then laid against the dominant messages displayed in popular media which revealed a message of exaggerations and embellishments combined with strands of truth.

The academic community has received a great deal of scrutiny during the past several decades, as evidenced by the repeated public attacks on the behavior and work motivation (or lack thereof) of college faculty. Cohen's (1986) Saints and Scamps echoed many of the same sentiments as had Professor X's (1973) This Beats Working for a Living two decades earlier. The pressure for accountability has also come to the forefront in popular media, arming print, fiction, cinema, and prime-time television as venues for venting frustration with higher education's overall performance. Recent attempts at Total Quality Management (TQM) or Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) by higher education administrators have even further demonstrated the desire to incorporate faculty in decision-making, perhaps an attempt to better regulate their perceived freedom and lack of formal, office-related responsibility.

Although attempts at reforming higher education through faculty-directed mechanisms have become somewhat popular, little has been done to form an understanding of the cultures which embody the academic enterprise. Birnbaum's (1991) representation of academic life included five dominant cultures, all cloaked in the umbrella of organizational behavior: collegial, bureaucratic, anarchial, political, and cybernetic. The cybernetic organization was identified as one in which numerous subcultures interact and provide no clear dominant subgroup, thus lending credence to a more detailed examination of faculty cultures.

In addition to understanding faculty cultures from the vantage point of organizational life-style, a clearer understanding of faculty cultures is important from the perspective of academic administrators. Keller (1983), among others, has made compelling arguments and provided studies in relation to the academic management enterprise; yet little understanding is given to the relationship of the administrator to faculty members. Higher education continues to prove itself as a labor-intensive industry where 80% or more of most institutions' revenues go directly to salaries. Thus, an understanding of the commitment of the organization, as demonstrated through fiscal allocations, is a necessity.

The current study was designed as a response to the need for a better understanding of faculty cultures. Perhaps more importantly, the study was fashioned to describe faculty cultures in their own voices. This proves important for the effectiveness of administrative bodies which must consider the faculty experience in decision-making and consensus development.

What is the Culture of Faculty?

Cinema Perspectives

To begin to develop an understanding of the contemporary college faculty culture, the popular representation of faculty in the cinema was examined. The power of the film industry to shape and mold attitudes and opinions is dramatic, and any understanding of the faculty culture must be addressed with

respect to how faculty members are popularly portrayed. To develop this understanding, 30 different films from the past three decades were examined to identify trends, issues, and characteristics of college faculty (see Table 1).

After analyzing these films, the conclusion was drawn that faculty are viewed as being "different," and while somewhat respected, they are certainly not individuals to be commonly admired. With several exceptions, faculty members were seen as aloof ("Paper Chase"), lacking common sense and direction ("Absent Minded Professor"), and often abusive of their position ("Back to School," and "The Creator").

Fiction Perspectives

After examining 12 works of fiction related to higher education (see Table 2), the conclusion was reached that in popular fiction, faculty are portrayed as self-important, tend to hide behind their institution, and are not held in high esteem by most students and the general public. While the concept of academic integrity was consistently paraded before the reader (Rookery Blues), most faculty were described as bumbling (Amends for Murder), self-serving (Moo and A Tenured Professor) and lacking the common sense to function in society (Lucky Jim).

Press Perspectives

The popular media, as reflected in newspaper journalism, contain multiple references to higher education institutions and

the various actors on the college campus. To glean an understanding of what was referenced, a series of national newspapers were studied. These newspapers were reviewed for a given day each week between 1993 and 1996, and the analysis was completed using microfiche versions which were made available through various libraries. Typical news reports focused on the negative, including such stories as sexual abuse of students by faculty; abuse of sabbatical programs; irresponsible office hours; irresponsible conduct in the classroom; laziness by administrators, faculty, and students; over-paid administrators and athletic coaches; and the lack of professional or 'real-world' experience both in faculty as well as in their preparation of students. The conclusion was subsequently drawn that the news media saw the faculty role as once noble; however it is currently marginalized by a cynical community.

Academic Perspectives

Research into faculty cultures has generally identified dichotomous faculty, including either teachers or researchers, or "cosmopolitans" who have an externally focused disposition, or "locals" whose attention is directed primarily to the campus. This view is largely determined by the institutional type, and faculty members have been classified based upon their view of their personal and professional worlds, and subsequently behave accordingly (Birnbaum, 1988; Miller, McCormack, & Newman, 1995). The result to the academic culture is the concept that faculty

members affiliate within their profession and institution based on their perceptions of the world around them and what motivates them.

In addition to reliance on faculty responsibilities for defining culture, faculty have demonstrated that they affiliate within their academic specialization or unique interest area predicated on how they view themselves within their disciplines, i.e., directed toward the field of study nationally or directed toward the profession of teaching at their home institution. Therefore, faculty point of view determines faculty behavior.

Within institutions, faculty derive their culture from a variety of sources. Birnbaum's (1988) representation of collegiate cultures (being stratified into collegial, bureaucratic, anarchial, and political) has been well documented and consistently addressed in the literature base. Scholars such as Bergquist (1992), Chronister (1991), and Gilmour (1991) have all argued the classification, with each noting the ability and process of decision-making. The result is an understanding of power being related to groups and not individuals, lending credence to the concept of consensus development and political behavior to exert influence and define culture.

Research Methods

Structured interviews were held with 50 faculty at three universities. The universities included one Carnegie Classification Doctoral Granting University, one private masters-

granting Comprehensive University, and one Research I University. All interviews were conducted in the Summer of 1996, and participants were included by their willingness to participate in the 45-minute interviews. As a cautionary note, the exploratory nature of the study justified, to some extent, the convenience sample and the non-stratification of participants by academic discipline. As a result, generalizations from this data should be extended with caution.

Transcripts and interview notes were studied and compared to the related literature on cultures and power. All interviewed faculty members were able to review the notes and conclusions from their interviews, and data were further triangulated between the authors.

Findings

Through the interviewing and data collection, the following findings were identified which described the cultures and beliefs about faculty. Transcripts were intially reviewed by both researchers, and an independent third party reviewed the cluster statements providing validation of the findings.

All Faculty: Faculty who were interviewed generally believed themselves to be:

--under-appreciated by administrators and students;

--isolated from the general public;

--"keepers" of wisdom and knowledge in a vaporous society;

--the primary reason students attend college;

--"true and honest" as compared to "something else" for administrators.

Junior Faculty: Faculty at the assistant professor level (and one instructor) indicated the following about themselves:

--lucky and appreciative of having a job;

--overwhelmed with responsibilities;

--exploited by older faculty when it came to completing committee work;

--exploited by middle-level administrators;

--trustful and enthusiastic about senior-level administrators;

--believed respect and trust would improve.

Senior Faculty: Faculty at the associate and full professor level perceived themselves to be:

--survivors, but yet still possessing their original traits innovation and creativity remaining;

--distrustful of middle-level administrators and generally neutral towards, or mocking of senior-level administrators;

--possessing a strong vein of radicalism (even if this radical voice had not recently been acted upon);

--believing the institution over-values external activities;

--finding self-fulfillment for themselves from campus based activities;

--responsible for junior faculty once they have been "broken in;"

--responsible for most academic administration, such as curriculum, tenure, and admissions;

--part of the remnants of a once highly respected profession.

Conclusions and Discussion

The general findings of the interviews suggest a validation of much of the academic work, such as that of Birnbaum, which contends that similarities exist between institutions, and may in fact be generational.

Power was found to be related to relative age, i.e., rank and time in a position, as compared to colleagues, as compared to chronological age. Power was also observed to be at least somewhat related to tenure status and faculty rank, reinforcing the concept that relative age may be more of a determinant in identifying power relationships on campus. Consequently, power was identified as negatively related to junior faculty ranks, except as it related to workload, where junior ranks were responsible for more of the (perceived) workload in on-campus activities.

As a paralell to the identification of who "holds" power on campus, administrative units were seen as dominance indicators, where power over faculty work responsibilty was identified as a key to work satisfaction.

Regardless of these power relationship issues, cultural indicators were viewed primarily as institutionally specific.

Despite this belief, the findings did indicate some commonality among institutions in terms of how senior faculty see themselves in relation to junior faculty. Similarly, junior faculty were consistently markedly more optimistic and less cynical, regardless of the institution.

Finally, the media and popular culture indicators identified an eclectic combination of caricatures (i.e. exaggerations and embellishments combined with strands of truth), drawing on stereotypes.

Further research may delve into how power relationships differ when considered in formal faculty governance units and how issues of trust and respect relate to institutional management. Perhaps a more meaningful question for state-assisted institutions is how do popular media representations of higher education influence state or municipal decision making.

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Table 1.

Films Reviewed to Portray Faculty Culture

Film
1. Son of Flubber
2. Absent Minded Professor
3. Malice
4. How I Got Into College
5. Affairs of Dobbie Gillis
6. Rudy
7. Animal House
8. Francis Goes to Westpoint
9. An Annapolis Story
10. The World's Greatest Athlete
11. Listen to Me
12. College Confidential
13. College Holiday
14. College Humor
15. Fraternity Row
16. Fraternity Vacation
17. Mother is a Freshman
18. Revenge of the Nerds
19. Revenge of the Nerds II
20. Sorority Girl
21. Lords of Discipline
22. Heart of Dixie
23. Nutty Professor
24. Nutty Professor
25. P.C.U.
26. Educating Rita
27. The Allnighter
28. The Program
29. Bluechips
30. Necessary Roughness
31. Soul Man
32. Fastbreak
33. With Honors
34. DOA
35. The Paper Chase

Table 2.

Novels Reviewed to Portray Faculty Culture

Novel
1. Moo
2. Class
3. Crossing to Safety
4. Oleanna
5. Rookery Blues
6. A Tenured Professor
7. Changing Places
8. Lords of Discipline
9. Lucky Jim
10. Amends for Murder
11. Death in a Tenured Position
12. Death of a Joyce Scholar